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THE GRENFELL INQUIRY

Disasters and public inquiries – what impact might they have?

The comments about the opening of the inquiry into the Grenfell disaster prompted me to review the report of the Tribunal into the disaster at Aberfan in October 1966 in which 144 people died, including 116 children. The report makes sober reading even after many years.

I wrote a note on LinkedIn on the disaster last year on the 50th anniversary of events at Aberfan.

The Tribunal sat for 76 days and the report was published in July 1967, just 9 months after the event. The Tribunal team did not find it necessary to sit in private. The local people who had suffered as a result of the disaster were asked to give their evidence first and were allowed a great deal of forbearance in giving their evidence out of respect for their losses and suffering.

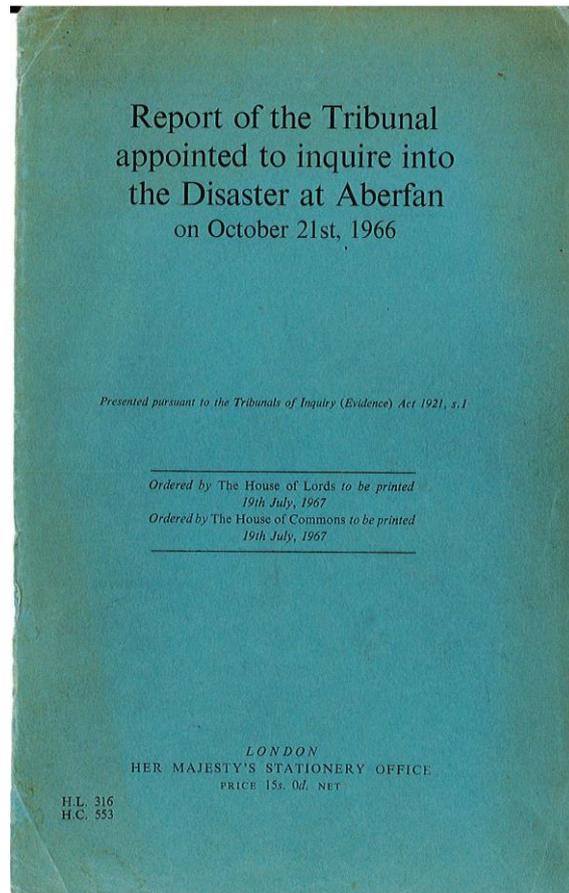
I attended the hearings for a few days when the Tribunal met in Merthyr and later prepared a paper on the effect that the disaster had on the water mains and water supplies in the Taff valley and the City of Cardiff. Two large water mains, fundamental elements of the water supply system, were broken by the slide and a great deal of water escaped and added immensely to the trouble for those people trying to find out if anyone had survived in the collapsed buildings. Water supplies were severely affected and temporary pipes on the surface and then permanent mains underground had to be laid to restore supplies. I presented my paper at a meeting of the Institution of Civil Engineers in Cardiff in 1967 after the publication of the Tribunal's report.

The chairman of the Tribunal was Sir Edmund Davies one of Her Majesty's Lords Justices of Appeal who was born in Mountain Ash not many miles from Aberfan.

The Tribunal found that the disaster could and should have been prevented and commented as follows; *'We found that many witnesses, not excluding those who were intelligent, had been oblivious of what lay before their eyes. It did not enter their consciousness. They were like moles being asked about the habits of birds. The report tells not of wickedness but of ignorance, ineptitude and a failure in communications'*.

Strong words but necessary in those circumstances.

To my way of thinking the Tribunal reported that the safety and the quality of life of people living in the community had been too readily ignored.



The tribunal found individuals involved in the management of the National Coal Board (NCB) at senior levels, including the manager of the mine, to be 'blameworthy' and reported on their actions or lack of action in great detail. The manager of the mine was Mr. Wynne who was a neighbour of mine in Abercynon. As one can imagine Mr. Wynne never got over the disaster and his share of the responsibilities for the dreadful event. He died 7 years later, a broken man.

The report provided recommendations which were a wake-up call for the mineral processing industry and civil engineers. A great deal changed as a result. A great deal needed to change since both mining engineers and civil engineers were generally uncaring and ignorant of the impact that their activities were having on people and the environment.

The response after Aberfan was to produce an act of parliament and regulations on the design, construction and management of mines, quarries and tips of mineral waste where nothing like this had existed before. These regulations have been rigorously applied since then.

Kind regards

Ivor

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